

Statement of Subcommittee Chairwoman Martha McSally (R-AZ) Border and Maritime Security Subcommittee

"A Dangerous and Sophisticated Adversary: The Threat to the Homeland Posed by Cartel Operations" February 16, 2017

Remarks as Prepared

First, I would like to welcome the newest member of our Subcommittee, the gentleman from Florida, Mr. Rutherford. I look forward to working with you and the other new Members of the Committee. As we begin the 115th Congress, let me be clear from the outset, I hope that over the course of this Congress we can engage in thoughtful and productive conversations that lead to legislation that will help secure our Homeland.

One of my goals this year as Chair of this Subcommittee is to drill down on the threat that an unsecure border poses to our fellow Americans, which will be the focus of our conversation today. At our next hearing, we will hear from the leaders of the border security joint task forces, authorized by this Committee last Congress, to examine the nation's counter-network approach to combating the threat.

Protecting our borders is a multifaceted effort. The job of securing the land border falls primarily to the U.S. Border Patrol, while it is the job of the U.S. Coast Guard to secure our maritime border. The Office of Field Operations has the important role of securing more than three hundred ports of entry while Air and Marine Operations carries out air and maritime environment missions to detect and interdict unlawful people and cargo approaching our borders.

Finally, Homeland Security Investigations supports national security through its investigatory authorities and responsibilities.

These are not simple or easy tasks.

The southwest border is a dynamic place with unforgiving terrain – rugged mountains, scorching desert, high cliffs, canyons and more than a thousand miles of river. The maritime border is more than 4.5 million square miles of vast ocean, patrolled by a limited number of assets, providing cartels with enormous expanses of territory in which to conduct illicit activities.

Congress has appropriated billions of dollars to shore up our border defenses. Today we have an impressive array of technology, infrastructure and personnel deployed to keep the nation safe. Despite our best efforts, we have seemingly made little progress over the last few years to secure the border. Most recently reports and testimony suggest that, between our ports of entry, we are little more than 50% effective at stopping people from crossing the border illegally, and narcotics continue to pour into our communities unabated.

But on the other side of the border, our adversary, the Mexican drug cartels, operate a wide reaching network. Nothing moves in or out unless the cartel plaza boss says so. Cartel presence, influence and power throughout Mexico is ubiquitous. Corruption is endemic, and local law enforcement in Mexico often find themselves ill-equipped to handle the vast amounts of cartel activity. Smuggling drugs and people is a billion dollar business and the individuals in charge have one goal in mind: make as much money as possible delivering illicit narcotics and people across the border and into the United States.

Obscene profits incentivize the cartels to be entrepreneurial and innovative in the tactics they use to successfully smuggle their illicit cargo. For instance, we know that they conduct extensive countersurveillance against our agents. They place spotters, or scouts, on mountains, and use the high ground to guide the drug loads away from agents and other detection assets.

Sophisticated and deep tunnels that include the use of ventilation systems and rail cars to expedite the movement of drugs have also been used. And we have seen a proliferation of unorthodox methods of smuggling, such as the use of propane-powered double barrel cannons to shoot hundreds of pounds of drugs over the fence.

Ultralight aircraft, difficult to detect on radar, have been used under the cover of darkness to fly marijuana over the border – dropping it very quickly and then returning undetected to Mexico.

In my district in Arizona, authorities broke up a complicated smuggling ring in Cochise County. The criminal network specialized in drive-through operations that used vehicle convoys laden with thousands of pounds of drugs to cross remote parts of the border. They used scouts, encrypted communication, and specialized codes to avoid detection. It was not an amateur operation by any means. To the contrary, it was a sophisticated criminal enterprise with advanced tactics designed to thwart law enforcement at every turn.

That is the nature of the adversary we face along the border.

San Diego was once one of the busiest sectors for illicit traffic in the nation, but concerted efforts in the 1990s and early 2000s that included additional fence and manpower brought the situation under control.

Nonetheless, because the cartels are nimble, they responded by using small open-hulled vessels called "panga boats" to push drug loads farther and farther off the coast of California, making them more difficult to detect, track, and ultimately interdict. Semi-submersibles, painted blue to blend in with the ocean, and barely visible above the water line, have been used to deliver multi-ton cocaine loads to Mexico. Their ultimate destination is cities and towns across our country.

As we increase our focus this Congress on securing the border, we have to be clear-eyed about the dangerous and sophisticated threat that we face from our adversaries on the other side.

Rest assured, the cartels will not sit idly by while we increase manpower, technology and infrastructure that threaten their business model. They will adapt, innovate and just plain out-smart us if we do not leverage the full power of the government to focus on countering the cartel network. I thank the witnesses for being here this morning and look forward to their testimony.